

Madera Unified may slash adult school prog

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By Chris Collins / The Fresno Bee

The Madera Unified School District board is considering a plan to eliminate programs that help thousands of students leave school courses or earn a GED.

The district says it must either "suspend" its adult school indefinitely or reduce its budget by more than 75% to help close school serves more than 5,000 students each year.

The plan is yet another sign of financial distress for the district, which serves about 20,000 students.

Frustration among teachers has been intensified by the Madera Unified board's decision in December to award a new contract to Stafford that included benefits equivalent to a 9% raise.

Madelyn Jones, who has taught at the adult school for 21 years, said the school already is short on funding and hasn't been able to help students working on their high school diplomas. She said some students suggested using the superintendent's raise to buy more books.

"And you know, they've got a point," Jones said.

Through a spokesman, Stafford declined to comment for this story.

If the adult school closes, there would be few alternatives for people 18 and older in Madera who have dropped out of high school and compete for jobs.

The Madera Community College Center doesn't offer many of the services provided by the adult school and its high school. Chowchilla's adult school also is feeling the budget squeeze and doesn't have any room for new students.

Teachers and students say it would be difficult for adult school students -- many of whom are poor and use public transportation -- to get to schools in Fresno.

"The loss of the Madera adult education programs would be a loss of resources for our community," said Cecilia Massetti, director of the Madera County Office of Education. "There's not really any other agencies that would pick up those services at this time."

In addition to GEDs, the Madera adult school provides certification courses for emergency medical technicians, firefighter certification, cosmetologists. First-generation immigrants pay \$25 a semester to learn English.

The Madera adult school also pays for a preschool program that is open to anyone, regardless of income, for \$100 a month. Many parents in the program with their kids.

About 100 students, teachers and parents rallied Friday at Courthouse Park in Madera to protest the proposed closure.

"I don't think they should close it down because there's too many people trying to get a GED or a high school diploma," said one woman trying to complete her high school courses at the adult school. "I pray it doesn't close down."

An initial list of proposed budget cuts submitted by Madera Unified's staff earlier this month suggests trimming \$2.7 million from the budget by closing the adult school.

News of that proposal helped draw hundreds of people into a packed budget hearing Feb. 9 in the Madera South High School. Students pleaded with board members to scale back the school's budget rather than eliminate it.

The district's budget won't be finalized for several months and board members said they are willing to consider alternative the school could close unless school unions agree to make deep concessions, such as furloughs and deferring cost-of-liv

"We're going to have to set our priorities on our K-12 kids first," Seibert said.

District spokesman Jake Bragonier said that the district staff will offer a new plan to the board on Tuesday that would redi \$600,000 -- a fraction of its current budget. He said he's not sure which services would still be offered by the school. The closing the adult school, came up with the new proposal after the contentious public hearing, Bragonier said.

Other proposed cuts to the district's budget include laying off dozens of teachers and other district employees, implement employees and eliminating some summer-school funding and high school student bus services.

In a telling sign of just how desperate the district is to make cuts, board member Robert Garibay asked the district's staff 1 district could save by eliminating all school athletics, though he stressed that he wasn't seriously considering making thos

Babette Jaire, president of the Madera Unified Teachers Association, said teachers probably will agree to some concessi are willing to go." Negotiations haven't begun yet, she said.

Madera Unified appears to be the only large school district in the region considering closing its adult school. Central Unifi Unified said that despite having to make budget cuts, they have no plans to close their adult schools.

But some other large school districts in the state also are considering drastic cutbacks or even closure of adult schools, s the adult education office for the California Department of Education.

Last year, the Madera adult school helped 115 students earn a high school diploma. One was Stephen Soto, who stoppe turned 18. Back then, he said, he was a "problem child" who partied hard.

Now 25, he has realized that he needs to get his life back on track. He took a few math courses at the adult school last ye studying nursing at Madera Community College Center.

"I was just done with all that messing around and they had the right people to help me," Soto said of the adult school. "It v

He said he is worried others won't have the same opportunity.

"With the way the economy is, you've got to have your high school diploma," Soto said. "We need this adult school in Ma think of closing it."